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JONSON'S *EPICOENE* AND LADY ARABELLA STUART

On February 18, 1610, Contarini and Correr, Venetian representatives in England, wrote as follows¹ to the Doge and Senate:

Lady Arabella [Stuart] is seldom seen outside her rooms and lives in greater dejection than ever. She complains that in a certain comedy the playwright introduced an allusion to her person and the part played by the Prince of Moldavia. The play was suppressed. Her Excellency is very ill pleased and shows a determination in this coming Parliament to secure the punishment of certain persons, we don't know who.

In the following pages I shall try to show that the offensive play referred to in the passage just quoted was Ben Jonson's *Epicoene*, or *Silent Woman*.²

At the beginning of the discussion it should be noted that we have indisputable evidence that Jonson's play did meet with disfavor. Beaumont's lines on the production seem to imply that certain individuals had detected satire or burlesque in the drama.³ Jonson himself wrote "another" prologue,⁴ occasioned, we are informed, by "some persons impertinent exception"; he likewise informed Drummond in the process of their conversation⁵ that when *Epicoene* was "first acted, ther was found verses after on the stage against him, concluding that that play was well named the Silent Woman, ther never was one man to say *Plaudite* to it." And finally, an interesting passage in the dedication to Sir Francis Stuart prefixed to the 1616 folio edition of the play makes it certain that Jonson had suffered "by an un-certaine accusation" in connection with the production.

There is no doubt, then, that the drama caused Jonson trouble. Fleay⁶ and others think that *Epicoene* met with disfavor because

¹ *Cal. State Papers, Venetian*, 1607-10, p. 427.

² Smith in his admirable edition of Wotton (I, 414, note 2) remarked incidentally that Jonson's play, "acted in 1609," may have been the play to which Lady Arabella objected. Smith's remark was the "suggestion" for the present paper.

³ Gifford-Cunningham ed. of Jonson, I, cv.

⁴ Henry's ed. of *Epicoene*, p. 10.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. xxii.

⁶ *Biog. Chron.*, I, 374.

of the personal satire contained in it, Truewit appearing to be Jonson himself and Sir John Daw representing Sir John Harington. These identifications may be possible;¹ but probably the most objectionable feature of the play was, as we shall see, the passage resented by Lady Arabella Stuart.

Before quoting this offensive passage in *Epicoene*, it should also be noted that the play was presented at a time which corresponds exactly to the date of the objectionable performance mentioned by Contarini and Correr. The title-page of the 1616 edition states that the drama was "Acted in the yeere 1609 by the Children of her Maiesties Revells"; and Fleay,² Miss Henry,³ and Murray⁴ are agreed that here Jonson is dating his production by the old style; hence *Epicoene* was presented, they affirm, between January 4, 1609-10, when the reconstructed Children of the Queen's Revels began to occupy the Whitefriars Theatre, and the following March 25. Thorndike, to be sure, has attempted to show⁵ that Jonson "invariably" used the new style and not the old in the folio edition of his works, and that "in 1609" on the title-page of *Epicoene* therefore means the period January 1, 1609, to January 1, 1610; but Murray has satisfactorily showed that such a conclusion is not warranted by the evidence.⁶

Granting, then, that the play was first presented between January 4, 1610, and February 18 of the same year, the date of the letter quoted above, the question arises whether the play contains in its present form (Jonson insists that he has not changed a syllable from "the simplicity of the first copy") a passage that might well have

¹ Dryden in his *Essay on Dramatic Poesy* (ed. Ker, p. 84) says of Morose: "Besides this, I am assured from divers persons, that Ben Johnson was actually acquainted with such a man, one altogether as ridiculous as he is here represented." I do not find that anyone has suggested this original of Morose as a complainant against Jonson's drama.

² *Biog. Chron.*, I, 374.

³ Ed. of *Epicoene*, p. xxii.

⁴ *Eng. Dram. Companies*, I, 153-54.

⁵ *Influence of Beaumont and Fletcher on Shakespeare*, pp. 16-17.

⁶ *Eng. Dram. Cos.*, I, 358, note. E. K. Chambers (*Mod. Lang. Review*, IV, 164) is inclined to accept Thorndike's dating of *Epicoene*, but he is troubled by the fact that the Children of Her Majesty's Revels could not well have acted *Epicoene* "in 1609." He remarks: "On the other hand, if the name 'Children of her Majesty's Revels' was really first revived by Rossiter, Jonson must have forgotten the fact." It is not so likely that Jonson forgot as it is that Thorndike erred.

offended Lady Arabella at this particular time. I believe that it does. In V, i, occurs a passage that has caused editors trouble.¹

Mavis. Gentlemen, have any of you a pen-and-inke? I would faine write out a riddle in Italian, for Sir Dauphine to translate.

Clerimont. Not I, in troth, lady; I am no scrivener.

Daw. I can furnish you, I thinke, lady.

[*Exeunt Daw and Mavis.*]

Clerimont. He has it in the haft of a knife, I beleewe.

La-Foole. No, he has his boxe of instruments.

Clerimont. Like a surgeon!

La-Foole. For the mathematiques: his squire, his compasses, his brasse pens, and black-lead, to draw maps of every place and person where he comes.

Clerimont. How, maps of persons!

La-Foole. Yes, sir, of Nomentack, when he was here, and of the Prince of Moldavia, and of his mistris, Mistris Epicoene.

[*Re-enter Daw.*]

Clerimont. Away! he has not found out her latitude, I hope.

La-Foole. You are a pleasant gentleman, sir.

Now it will be noted that the last idea of La-Foole's speech—"and of the Prince of Moldavia, and of his mistris, Mistris Epicoene"—is rather peculiarly expressed, that the expression "his mistris" is associated with "the Prince of Moldavia" until the words "Mistris Epicoene" give a different turn to the meaning. Let us suppose that about the middle of February, 1610, some actor speaking the lines should have paused just before uttering the words "Mistris Epicoene" or should have omitted them altogether. Are there any reasons for thinking that the audience would have immediately seen an allusion to Lady Arabella as the "mistris" of the Prince of Moldavia and that the lady herself, when informed of the trick, would have resented bitterly this "allusion to her person and the part played by the Prince of Moldavia"?

Now the Prince of Moldavia referred to by Jonson and by the Venetian representatives was Stephen Bogdan, pretender to the Moldavian throne, who visited England in October, 1607,² and who

¹ Cunningham (ed. of Jonson, III, 453) can give no account of the Prince of Moldavia; Miss Henry (p. 258) is unable to discover anything regarding this prince; the latest editor of *Epicoene* (Gayley, *Representative English Comedies*, II, 225) prints the line without a note.

² *Cal. State Papers, Venetian*, 1607-10, p. 49.

was one of the numerous suitors for the hand of the Lady Arabella. Somewhat later he brazenly took up his quarters at Wotton's Venetian residence, and, although married to a Venetian lady, gave out that he was engaged to Arabella Stuart, cousin of the king of England.¹ Still later he went to Constantinople; and on January 28, 1610—at the approximate date, it should be noted, when *Epicoene* was acted—Correr wrote from London that Lady Arabella's

troubles are caused by a consignment of money which her Excellency made at Constantinople for a Moldavian Prince, and by Douglas' intention to go to the Port with instructions on the matter. The Moldavian was many months ago at the English Court, and, as I hear, with the King's consent negotiated about marriage with the Lady; the conclusion thereof to depend on his making good his claim to his State.²

At about the same time, I presume, Boderie, the French ambassador in England, "distinctly stated that Arbella wished to marry the Prince of Moldavia," and, continues Hardy in his *Arbella Stuart*,³ the Frenchman, after speaking of the lady's arrest and examination before the Council, "did not fail to deduce scandalous suggestions from these details."

These passages give some idea of the gossip which about the time of the performance of *Epicoene* was associating Lady Arabella and Moldavia.

And there are special reasons why gossip was concerned with the king's cousin during February, 1610, and why the lady herself should have especially resented being alluded to as the "mistress" of Stephen Bogdan. In the preceding December she had been arrested, as indicated in the letters above, and many persons in England concluded that amorous matters had led to her disgrace. Correr, for example, wrote on January 8, 1610, that she and Sir George Douglas had been placed under arrest in consequence of the king's suspicion that they were to elope across the seas.⁴ We have already seen that Boderie slanderously associated the names of Lady Arabella and Bogdan.

¹ Smith's ed. of Wotton, I, 414; cf. also *Cal. State Papers, Venetian*, 1607-10, p. xvii, where Hinds gives certain facts of Bogdan's career, referring the reader to Jorga's *Pre-tendenti Domnesci* for further information.

² *Cal. State Papers, Venetian*, 1607-10, p. 414.

³ *Arbella Stuart, A Biography*, pp. 229-30. The letter cited by Hardy does not seem to be in the 1750 ed. of Boderie's *Ambassades*.

⁴ *Cal. State Papers, Venetian*, 1607-10, p. 405.

Other contemporary documents indicate further slander of the lady. On February 13, 1610, Chamberlain¹ wrote:

The Lady Arabella's business, whatsoever it is, is ended, and she restored to her former state and grace. The King gave her a cupboard of plate better than £200 for a New Year's gift, and a thousand marks to pay her debts, besides some yearly addition to her income. Want being thought the chief cause of her discontentment, though she be not altogether free from the suspicion of being collapsed.

As Hardy² and Mrs. Murray Smith³ both note, the word "collapsed" is ambiguous, and may well be a reference to the common court gossip of the time associating Lady Arabella with Bogdan. Two days later (February 15) Beaulieu,⁴ secretary to Sir Thomas Edmondson, wrote as follows:

The Lady Arabella, who (as you know) was not long ago censured for having without the King's Privy entertained a Motion of Marriage, was again within these few Days deprehended in the like Treaty with my Lord of Beauchamp's Second Sonne, and both were called and examined yesterday at the Court about it. What the matter will prove I know not; but these affectations of Marriage in her, do give some advantage to the world of impairing the Reputation of her constant and virtuous Disposition.

It should be noted here that, during Lady Arabella's first trial "for having without the King's Privy entertained a Motion of Marriage," King James and his courtiers believed that she was trying to marry the Prince of Moldavia; and we have seen how gossip interpreted her actions. As a matter of fact, however, Lady Arabella was at that very time much in love with William Seymour, whom she afterward married; hence taking advantage of James's ignorance as to the true state of affairs and his apparent objection to Moldavia, she had by February 13 won his confidence by promising solemnly never to marry a foreigner. In turn he gave her his permission to marry any man she pleased so long as he was a "loyal subject of the realm."⁵ Her choice of William Seymour and her subsequent troubles resulting therefrom need not concern us here.

¹ Mrs. Murray Smith, *Life of Arabella Stuart*, I, 238-39.

² *Arbella Stuart*, p. 230.

³ *Life of Arabella Stuart*, I, 239.

⁴ Winwood, *Memorials*, III, 119.

⁵ Hardy, p. 230.

From what has preceded, it is clear, I think, why an actor would have been tempted to pronounce Jonson's lines as I have suggested above or to omit the "Mistris Epicoene" at the end of La-Foole's speech; and it is clear, too, why an apparent allusion to Lady Arabella as the "mistris" of Moldavia would have been especially out of place about the middle of February, 1610, a time when such an allusion would have been especially objectionable alike to the lady and her cousin the king. And under the circumstances we can rest assured that no time was lost in suppressing Jonson's play as soon as an informer or an enemy of the poet carried to Lady Arabella an account of the "allusion" to herself and the Prince of Moldavia. It is possible, too, that the offense given by the play explains why Daniel, and not Jonson, wrote the elaborate masque (i.e. *Tethys Festival*) of the following June to celebrate the creation of Henry as Prince of Wales, a masque in which the Lady Arabella, then restored to favor, took a leading part.¹

And finally, the explanation offered above has an advantage in that it gives special significance to the fact that Jonson's play, which offended Lady Arabella, was, soon after her death on September 25, 1615, dedicated to her kinsman Sir Francis Stuart.² May we not consider it a tribute to Jonson's manhood that, soon after the pathetic death of the lady whom his drama had offended, he should, in the following terms, have dedicated that drama to her kinsman:

There is not a line or syllable in it changed from the simplicity of the first copy. And, when you shall consider, through the certaine hatred of some, how much a mans innocency may bee indanger'd *by an un-certaine accusation*; you will, I doubt not, so beginne to hate the iniquitie of such natures, as I shall love the contumely done me, whose end was so honorable as to be wip'd off by your sentence.

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¹ Mrs. Murray Smith, *Life of Arabella Stuart*, I, 252-53.

² Lady Arabella and Sir Francis were half second cousins. For facts in the life of the latter, see Aubrey, *Brief Lives*, ed. Clark, II, 239-40; Wood's account quoted by Miss Henry, p. 124; Nichols, *Prog. of King James*, II, 343.